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# *The Persians in the Roman Near East*

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(602–630 AD)

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CLIVE FOSS

When the decisive battle of the Yarmuk in 636 AD gave the Muslim Arabs control of Syria, they gained a land that had been Roman for 700 years. Yet in the memory of most of its inhabitants, their recent subjection to the Sassanian Persians would have been fresh and even dominant. The forces of Chosroes II, which had controlled Syria for a generation, had only been withdrawn in 630. Anyone who had reached adulthood by the time the Arabs arrived had already experienced the Persian occupation; many were born or raised during it. This period of Persian rule, which lasted twenty years or more in Syria, Mesopotamia and Armenia, fifteen in Palestine and ten in Egypt, may have played a major role in accustoming the locals to non-Roman rule, or may have had violently disruptive effects that facilitated the subsequent Arab conquest. So far, the period has been poorly known and never studied as a whole, allowing many theories to be projected upon it. For the most part, historians and especially archaeologists have assigned to the Persians a highly negative and destructive role. The Russian art historian, N. P. Kondakov, forcefully set the tone in 1904:

The Persian invasion immediately removed the effects of the imported Greco-Roman civilization in Palestine. It ruined agriculture, depopulated the cities, destroyed temporarily or permanently many monasteries and lauras, and stopped all trade development . . . From now on the cultural development of the country is ended.<sup>1</sup>

Georges Tchalenko, who studied the remains of the elegantly built late antique villages that cover much of northern Syria was more circumspect. For him, the great war between Rome and Persia (603–630) was a disaster for the country, not so much because of the violence of the Persians, who in fact wanted to rule the country and tried to accommodate the local population, but for their role in cutting off the Syrian farmers from their natural markets in the west, a fact that led to rapid economic decline.<sup>2</sup>

Philip Mayerson, writing of the early Muslim conquests, was struck by the violence of the Persian irruption:

There can be no doubt that the pillaging of the most holy city of Jerusalem, the desecration of its sanctuaries, and the massacre of thousands of its inhabitants, was the single most telling blow to the security of Christian communities throughout Palestine and to their faith in the imperial government. . . . By the time Heraclius recovered the city of Jerusalem in 628, the communities

<sup>1</sup> Quoted in A. A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire* (Madison, 1952), p. 195.

<sup>2</sup> G. Tchalenko, *Villages antiques de la Syrie du nord* (Paris, 1953), I, pp. 433–435.

of Southern Palestine and Sinai had been left to their own devices for almost half a generation. In the absence of imperial authority in the region – there is no evidence that the Persians filled the vacuum left by the Byzantines – the towns no doubt returned to the well-tried *modus vivendi* of paying tribute to local Bedouin tribes in return for guarantees against raids.<sup>3</sup>

This notion that the Persian regime represented anarchy and produced a fatal weakening of existing social and economic structures was expressed clearly by the excavators of Scythopolis in Palestine:

The fourteen years of Persian rule in the country had a crucial impact on the cities of Palestine . . . The damage was caused rather by the loss of contact with the sources of authority in the imperial palace and the capital and by the complete breakdown of the provincial administration. In such conditions, individual settlements were obliged to take care of their own needs and their own security . . . it is hard to believe that in these circumstances much attention was paid to the maintenance of current public works in the city, not to mention the rebuilding of public institutions . . . more license was given to citizens who had the power and enterprise to occupy parts of the public squares, buildings and sidewalks, or even to dismantle existing monuments in search of building materials.<sup>4</sup>

A similar view appears in another recent work based on the archaeological record:

The Persian war and occupation would certainly have had one major effect, which would eventually leave its traces in the entire material record – the flight of the aristocracy . . . the patronage that maintained the traditions of Greco-Roman urban life, with all its amenities in the form of public works and services, would have collapsed . . . . The officials departed with the Roman government (or if they stayed, most probably lost their influence); the aristocracy is unlikely to have lingered long after them. Patronage of secular public works probably collapsed with the arrival of a Persian administration . . . . The effects on the cities may not have been immediate, but in the long run their traditional existence was fatally undermined.<sup>5</sup>

The Persian occupation of the Near East has, thus, been held responsible for widespread destruction, the breakdown of settled conditions, undermining the existing social structure or at best isolation of the conquered territories from their natural markets with consequent economic decline. The unstated implication of all this is that the Persians, by fatally weakening the entire region, lay the ground for the rapid Roman collapse before the advancing Arabs, facilitated the Muslim conquest, and pushed the Near East into an inexorable decline which (for many) only accelerated under the Arabs. In any case, the period is potentially of great importance for the whole history of the Near East, and worth examining in more detail. At first sight, though, the evidence seems hopeless, for no source offers a coherent account of the period, beyond the war and conquests. Yet there is actually a great deal of scattered material that may support a different or perhaps more balanced view of these events and their consequences. The following pages will only sketch the conquests, but focus on the activities and policies of the Persians during the occupation, in the hope

<sup>3</sup> Philip Mayerson, "The First Muslim Attacks on Southern Palestine", *TAPA* 95 (1964), pp. 191, 192.

<sup>4</sup> Y. Tsafir and G. Foerster, "Urbanism at Scythopolis-Beth Shean in the Fourth to Seventh Centuries", *DOP* 51 (1997), p. 145.

<sup>5</sup> C. Foss, "Syria in Transition, AD 550–570", *ibid.*, pp. 189–269 at 262f.

of discerning their attitude toward their new provinces and the fate of those who inhabited them during these crucial years.

When the emperor Maurice was murdered in 602, the Persian king Chosroes II, whom the emperor had helped to the throne, launched a campaign against the Romans. Begun ostensibly to revenge his patron and ally, it turned into a devastating struggle, the last great war of antiquity.<sup>6</sup> Chosroes had fabulous success, seeming to restore the ancient glories of his Achaemenid predecessors. Mesopotamia, Syria and Palestine fell to the Persians, who also devastated the remaining Roman territories of Asia Minor.<sup>7</sup> Yet hardly had success culminated in the conquest of Egypt, than the brilliant campaigns of the emperor Heraclius penetrated to the heart of Persia and brought unexpected defeat and collapse. By 630, the lost lands were once again in Roman hands, but only for a brief moment before the onslaught of Islam brought permanent change to the entire region.

The war began with a two-pronged attack into Armenia and Mesopotamia. In the North, Persian forces broke into Armenia in 603 and, after initial defeats, conquered it in several campaigns.<sup>8</sup> They culminated in the capture of Theodosiopolis (Karin), far in the west of Armenia, in 607. Armenia became the base for attacks into Asia Minor as early as 611. Persian progress in Mesopotamia was slower, for they were faced with powerfully fortified cities. Here, though, Roman resistance was weakened when the imperial commander in the East, Narses, revolted against the new emperor Focas. Chosroes himself led the attacking forces: their first success was the capture of Dara, the major bulwark of the frontier, in 604 after a siege of more than a year.<sup>9</sup> The other cities – the chroniclers mention Amida, Tella, Rhesaina, Mardin, Carrhae and Mayafarqin as well as Circesium and Callinicum on the Euphrates – fell one by one.<sup>10</sup> Wherever they went, the Persians massacred the Romans whom they found but left the local populations in peace.<sup>11</sup> Finally, in 609, Edessa, the provincial capital and greatest city of the region, surrendered on terms. With this, Roman Mesopotamia had become Persian.

By now, the Roman Near East was in turmoil.<sup>12</sup> A revolt, that started in Africa and capitalised on violent local hostility to the regime of Focas, spread to Egypt and Syria and led to the accession of a new emperor, Heraclius, on 5 October 610. During that civil war, the Persians had made another devastating advance. On 7 August, their greatest general, Shahrbaraz, crossed the Euphrates; he rapidly took the powerful fortress of Zenobia and the

<sup>6</sup> For general accounts of the war see A. N. Stratos, *Byzantium in the Seventh Century* I (Amsterdam, 1968), pp. 103–117, and *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*, trans. R. W. Thomson, historical commentary by J. Howard-Johnston (Liverpool, 1999; henceforth *Sebeos* and *Sebeos Commentary*), pp. xxi–xxv and the detailed discussions of the commentary, pp. 193–231. See also, especially for the victories of Heraclius and analysis of sources, J. Howard-Johnston, “Heraclius’ Persian Campaigns and the Revival of the East Roman Empire, 622–630”, *War in History* 6 (1999), pp. 1–44.

<sup>7</sup> For the devastating policy the Persians consistently followed in Asia Minor, see C. Foss, “The Persians in Asia Minor and the End of Antiquity”, *EHR* 90 (1975), pp. 721–774.

<sup>8</sup> Conquest of Armenia: *Sebeos*, pp. 59–65, with *Sebeos Commentary*, pp. 199–203.

<sup>9</sup> For the campaigns in Mesopotamia and their intractable chronology, with analysis of the sources, see D. Olster, *The Politics of Usurpation in the Seventh Century* (Amsterdam, 1993), pp. 81–100; cf. *Sebeos Commentary*, p. 197f.

<sup>10</sup> Mardin supposedly resisted the Persians for two and a half years and the fortress of Hesna de Kepha on the Tigris for two: Dionysius of Tell-Mahre in A. Palmer, *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool, 1993), *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, ed. and tr. J.-B. Chabot (Paris 1901; henceforth, *MichSyr*), II, p. 378.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, II, p. 378.

<sup>12</sup> For the troubles in the Levant and the revolt of Heraclius, see Olster, *The Politics of Usurpation*, pp. 101–128 or the simpler but less accurate account of Stratos, *Byzantium*, pp. 76f., 80–88.

populous city of Hierapolis.<sup>13</sup> The Roman defences had collapsed; Syria was at the mercy of the invader.

Antioch, capital of the vast diocese of Oriens and the greatest city of Roman Syria, surrendered to the Persians on 8 October 610, followed by its southern neighbour Apamea a week later.<sup>14</sup> In 611, Emesa opened its gates. Soon after, the Persians were defeated near that city by Heraclius's brother Nicetas in a battle where both sides suffered considerable losses.<sup>15</sup> As a result, they made no further advances until 613, when Damascus surrendered. With that, the conquest of Syria was complete. In the same year, the Persians defeated an army led by Heraclius in person near the Cilician Gates, ironically where Alexander the Great a thousand years earlier had ensured the triumph of West over East. Now, the gates to Asia Minor and ultimately Constantinople lay open, but first the conquerors moved toward the rich lands to the south. On their way, they had to deal with the Empire's Arab allies, the Ghassanids who had long defended the southwest frontiers. The Persians defeated them in a battle about which nothing is known beyond allusions to it in the works of the poet Hassan, writing in Medina. This may be the battle that inspired the verses of the Koran, 'the Romans have been defeated in a nearer land'.<sup>16</sup>

The best attested event of these wars was the siege and capture of Jerusalem, widely regarded as a disaster for all Christendom as well as the empire.<sup>17</sup> Led by Shahrbaraz, the Persian forces moved on Galilee and the Jordan valley, then took Caesarea, which they made their base. After ensuring control of the entire coastal region, Shahrbaraz demanded the surrender of Jerusalem. The archbishop Zacharias and the officials in the city, despairing of relief from the Empire, agreed to terms, offered gifts and accepted a Persian garrison. Within a short time, however, the local youth, led by the ever-turbulent circus factions (the partisans of the games and races in the Hippodrome) revolted, killed the Persians and attacked the Jewish population. Shahrbaraz now moved on the offensive. A small detachment of imperial reinforcements from Jericho was soon dispersed and the Persians attacked the city with siege towers and heavy equipment. After twenty days, their catapults made a

<sup>13</sup> For the date see *Chronicon* 724 (the conventional name; it actually seems to have been composed around 640, so is one of the earliest sources for this period: see the discussion of Palmer, *West-Syrian Chronicles*, pp. 5–12) in Palmer, *West-Syrian Chronicles*, p. 17; for the chronology and comparative texts, see B. Flusin, *Saint Anastase le Perse et l'histoire de la Palestine au début du VIIe siècle* (two vols., text and commentary, Paris, 1992; henceforth *S. Anastase*) II, pp. 74–76.

<sup>14</sup> The sources for the date are ambiguous, with the Greek chronicler Theophanes giving May 611 for the Persian attack on Syria. 8 October, however, is attested by the generally reliable Syrian chronicler Dionysius (Palmer, *West-Syrian Chronicles*, p. 127), and most sources agree that the event took place in the first year of the reign of Heraclius (October 610–October 611). Strictly speaking, the date could be 610 or 611, but the numismatic evidence supports the earlier date: Heraclius struck no coins at Antioch; the last Byzantine issues there are of the last year of Focas, 609/610. For a discussion of the date (without the numismatic evidence), see *S. Anastase*, II, p. 78.

<sup>15</sup> According to Agapius of Menbidj (*Kitab al-'unwan. Histoire universelle*, ed. tr. A. Vasiliev, PO VIII.3 [Paris, 1912]), p. 450, the *marzban* 'Kesrouan' (evidently Khorream, the actual name of Shahrbaraz) was beaten; *Chron* 724 (Palmer, *West-Syrian Chronicles*, p. 17) only states that the Romans and Persians fought a battle at the sanctuary of St Thomas in Emesa.

<sup>16</sup> See the discussion of Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century* (Washington, 1995), pp. 637–639; *Koran* 30:1.

<sup>17</sup> For a general account, see Stratos, *Byzantium*, I, pp. 107–111; or, in full detail, with careful analysis of the sources, *S. Anastase*, II, pp. 129–164. Most of the following is based on the eyewitness account of the monk Strategios, which survives in Georgian and Arabic, translated by G. Garitte in CSCO 203 (Louvain, 1960) and CSCO 341 (Louvain, 1973). F. C. Conybeare published a convenient, somewhat abridged English translation, "Antiochos Strategos' Account of the Sack of Jerusalem in 614", *EHR* 25 (1910), pp. 502–517.

breach in the walls, and the Holy City of Christendom fell in May 614. The Persian army entered and, supported by the Jews, massacred tens of thousands and looted the city. The prize was the True Cross on which Christ had been crucified; it was sent off in triumph to Chosroes.

The conqueror was merciless to the Christian population. After the initial devastation and massacre, Shahrbaraz sent out criers urging the survivors to emerge from their hiding places. He then selected the able artisans and builders for deportation to Persia, imprisoning the rest in a huge cistern. There, they fell victim to the Jews, who first offered to ransom any who would deny Christ, and subsequently, when that failed, proceeded to buy captives from the Persians so that they could kill them. The Jews then began to demolish the churches. At this point, Jews seemed to have the upper hand in Palestine, to such an extent that some Christians converted. The Jews had active centres near Jericho, and apparently a corporate existence in the province.<sup>18</sup> Their success did not last long, however, for the Persians soon shifted their favour to the Christians, no doubt recognising that they formed the overwhelming majority in the province and had to be conciliated.

As the Persian army approached Jerusalem, the monks of Choziba near Jericho retreated across the river Jordan. The Great Laura of St Sabas, southeast of Bethlehem, suffered a worse fate. A week before the fall of Jerusalem, Saracen tribes of the desert profited from the chaos to descend on the monastery, loot it and kill 44 monks. The survivors took refuge in an abandoned monastery outside Jerusalem. At about the same time, the great monastic complex of Martyrius just east of the city was destroyed; it never recovered.<sup>19</sup> The Persian army rather than the tribes was probably the culprit here. During the next two years the Persians consolidated their control of Palestine.

In 616 or 617, Persian armies entered Egypt. After taking Pelusium on the frontier, where they are reported to have destroyed churches and monasteries, they advanced to the fortress of Babylon at the apex of the Delta. From there, on land and with ships, they followed the western branch of the Nile past Nikiu to Alexandria, the heavily fortified metropolis of Egypt and greatest city of the Near East.<sup>20</sup> After a long siege, they were finally able to infiltrate a few troops into the city through a channel used by fisherman.<sup>21</sup> When these seized control of one of the city gates, the patriarch and governor fled and Alexandria surrendered. By then, the Persians had attacked and looted numerous monasteries outside the walls of Alexandria; they never recovered, though others farther from the city escaped

<sup>18</sup> For relations between Persians, Christians and Jews, see G. Dagron and V. Deroche, "Juifs et chrétiens dans l'orient du VII<sup>e</sup> siècle", *TiavMem* 11 (1991), pp. 22–28, with further references. See also n.59 below.

<sup>19</sup> See *S. Anastase*, II, pp. 153f., 177–180, with long extracts from the main source, the contemporary letter of Antiochus of St Sabas (text in Migne, *PG* 89.1421–1428). See also J. Patrich, *Sabas, Leader of Palestinian Monasticism* (Washington, 1995) pp. 326–328. St Martyrius: *S. Anastase*, II, p. 21, esp. n. 30, which analyses the archaeological evidence.

<sup>20</sup> For the conquest of Egypt, see A. J. Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt*, ed. P. J. Fraser (Oxford, 1978), pp. 69–92 and R. Altheim-Stiehl, "The Sasanians in Egypt – Some Evidence of Historical Interest", *Bulletin de la société d'archéologie copte* 31 (1992), pp. 87–96, for complete and up-to-date references. Strictly speaking, the source for Pelusium, *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt... attributed to Abu-Salih the Armenian*, tr. B.T.A. Evetts (Oxford, 1895), p. 168, attributes the damage to "the Persians and the Arabs".

<sup>21</sup> The main sources for the capture of Alexandria are *History of the Patriarchs of the Coptic Church of Alexandria*, ed. tr. B. Evetts, *Patrologia Orientalis* 1, pp. 99–214, 381–518 (henceforth, *HistPatr*) 485 and *Chronicon anonymum*, ed. I. Guidi (CSCO, *ScrSyri* III.4, Paris 1903; not included in Palmer, *West-Syrian Chronicles*), p. 22f.

the devastation.<sup>22</sup> This was in 619; during the next year or two, they occupied the rest of the country as far as Syene. The conquest of the Roman East was complete.<sup>23</sup>

For a moment, the Persian empire had come close to regaining the territories that it had ruled before the victories of Alexander a millennium earlier. Yet this situation was not destined to endure: the Persians held Mesopotamia for more than twenty years, but Upper Egypt less than ten. The glory of Chosroes succumbed to the unexpected and brilliant campaigns of Heraclius who in 624 left Constantinople for the Caucasus. From there, he harried Persian positions in Georgia, Armenia and eastern Asia Minor, eluded all attempts to defeat him and made a fateful alliance with the Khazars who supplied huge forces for further attack. Despite a Persian attempt to capture Constantinople in 626, Heraclius persevered and in 627 struck deep into the heartland of Persia. After winning a major victory near Nineveh, he penetrated to the royal residence of Dastagerd. Chosroes fled and was murdered in February 628. The new government made peace, agreeing to evacuate all the conquests west of the Euphrates. Roman forces returned to Mesopotamia that year but Shahrbaraz, disaffected from Chosroes, still controlled most of the Near East. Finally, after a meeting with Heraclius in July 629, he agreed to complete the evacuation in return for support in seizing the Persian throne. His success there lasted only a few months; after his murder, the weak successor regime agreed to surrender all lands that had been Roman, including those east of the Euphrates. By 630, the last Persian troops were withdrawn, Heraclius solemnly received the true Cross in Jerusalem, and the East returned to Roman rule.

At first sight, scattered and fragmentary accounts in the chronicles seem to suggest that Persian rule was a disaster for the local populations, featuring bloodshed and extraordinary exactions. A closer examination of the evidence, though, indicates that destruction was limited to places that had resisted, and to the initial stages of conquest, and that the Persians generally retained existing systems of administration. Of course, they had long run an empire of their own. They, therefore, could impose their own systems, or maintain or adapt those they found in place. Like the Arabs after them, they normally chose the latter course, ruling the new provinces with a minimum of change or disturbance, so that they could prosper or at least provide the revenue needed for ruling them and for continuing the war. Treatment of the Near East varied from one region to another but inevitably involved establishing a stable system. The few available sources illuminate some provinces more than others but allow a general outline to be perceived.

Armenia, a crucial frontier district from which attacks against Asia Minor were launched, was put under a governor who combined civil and military powers.<sup>24</sup> He held the normal Persian title of *marzban*. After an initial atrocity in 609, when Chosroes ordered the inhabitants of Theodosiopolis deported to Ecbatana (they included the Chalcedonian Catholicos who died in captivity), this military regime seems to have provided security and some degree of

<sup>22</sup> *HistPatr*, p. 485.

<sup>23</sup> Among the varying dates for the fall of Alexandria in the sources, June 619 seems the most plausible, with the conquest of the Oxyrhynchite nome completed by January 620 and the rest of Egypt by early 621: see the lengthy discussions of R. Altheim-Stiehl, "Würde Alexandria im June 619 n. Chr. durch die Perser Erobert?", *Tyche* 6 (1991), pp. 3–16 and "Zur zeitlichen Bestimmung der sasanidischen Eroberung Ägyptens", *Mousikos Aner: Festschrift für Max Wegner* (Bonn, 1992), pp. 5–8.

<sup>24</sup> Listed in *Sebeos*, p. 66f.; cf. *Sebeos Commentary*, p. 204f.

prosperity, as indicated by church building.<sup>25</sup> The Catholicos Komitas was able to dedicate a new church to St Hripsime in 616/7 and to restore his cathedral in 618. These major constructions of real artistic significance were both in the ecclesiastical capital Valarshapat (Echmiadzin), which had been in Roman territory. Komitas rebuilt the cathedral in a more elaborate tetraconch plan and gave it a stone dome in place of the previous wooden cupola. St Hripsime, with its domed tetraconch enclosed in a rectangle and its monumental exterior, is considered one of the great achievements of medieval Armenian architecture.<sup>26</sup> Komitas may also have been responsible for the domed basilical church at Ptghni north of Erivan.<sup>27</sup> In Dvin, the administrative capital (which had always been in Persian Armenia), he completed the construction of the basilical church of St Gregory which had been begun in 607.<sup>28</sup> These are all part of a great blooming of innovative Armenian architecture that began in the late-sixth century and stretched into the mid-seventh, clear evidence that the Persian occupation did not interrupt the prosperity of the country.<sup>29</sup>

After the Persian conquest of the Holy Land, Armenian pilgrims were reaching the Holy Land and Modestus, patriarch of Jerusalem, could ask Komitas for material help in rebuilding his churches.<sup>30</sup> In all this, the Persians consistently favoured the local monophysite church, which had broken communion in 555 with the orthodox Chalcedonians of Roman western Armenia (and Constantinople). They allowed the church to function normally and the *marzban* presided over the selection of new patriarchs in 628 and in 630, until the Roman administration returned with its demands to follow the Chalcedonian creed.<sup>31</sup> Even in those last two years of occupation, after the defeat and death of Chosroes, the Persians still maintained a regular administration in Armenia and did all they could to ensure the country's prosperity.<sup>32</sup>

Mesopotamia followed a similar pattern.<sup>33</sup> Dara, the bulwark of the frontier, which had resisted Chosroes for a year and a half, suffered terribly: its inhabitants were slaughtered and everything valuable carried off to Persia.<sup>34</sup> If this were intended as a warning, it worked; all the other cities eventually surrendered on terms, so that, in the words of the Armenian chronicler Sebeos, they "were preserved in peace and prosperity".<sup>35</sup> Some details are known regarding Edessa which the Persians, like the Romans, made an administrative centre. As such it appears in a list of the kingdom's provincial capitals. It was the seat of a *marzban*,

<sup>25</sup> Theodosiopolis (Karin in Armenian): *Sebeos*, p. 64.

<sup>26</sup> Buildings of Komitas: *Ibid.*, p. 76f. Cathedral: P. Cuneo, *Architettura armena* (Rome, 1988) pp. 88–93; St Hripsime: *Ibid.*, pp. 98–101. See also the general works cited below, n.29.

<sup>27</sup> F. Gandolfo and A. Zarian, *Documents of Armenian Architecture 16: Ptghni/Arduch* (Milan, 1986), pp. 18–20.

<sup>28</sup> Buildings: Valarshapat: *Sebeos* p. 76f.; Dvin: *ibid.*, p. 48f., 64. See also M. D'Onofrio, *Le chiese di Dvin* (Rome, 1973), pp. 73, 86f.

<sup>29</sup> For these churches in a broader context, see R. Krautheimer, *Early Christian and Byzantine Architecture* (Harmondsworth, 1975), pp. 338–344 and Cyril Mango, *Byzantine Architecture* (New York, 1975), pp. 180–193, with excellent photographs.

<sup>30</sup> Relations between Armenia and Jerusalem are known from the correspondence between Komitas and Modestus, preserved in *Sebeos*, pp. 70–76, cf. *Sebeos Commentary*, pp. 208–210.

<sup>31</sup> *Sebeos*, p. 84f.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86f.

<sup>33</sup> For Persian rule in Mesopotamia and Syria, based largely on the Syriac chronicles, see the pioneering study of M. Morony, "Syria Under the Persians 610–629", *Proceedings of the Second Symposium on the History of Bilad al-Sham During the Early Islamic Period*, ed. M. A. Bakhit (Amman, 1987), I, pp. 87–95.

<sup>34</sup> *Sebeos*, p. 58, the most detailed account.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

and part of the huge “Quarter of the West”, one of the four districts that Chosroes I had organised in the sixth century.<sup>36</sup> Here, as in Armenia, the new rulers took an active interest in the church, expelling the hated Chalcedonian prelates. At first, the Persians tried to impose a Nestorian bishop from their own territories on Edessa, but when he was rejected, allowed monophysites to take control, to the great satisfaction of the locals who could rejoice that the Chalcedonian persuasion had vanished from all the lands east of the Euphrates.<sup>37</sup> The deposed Chalcedonian bishops took refuge in unoccupied Egypt, where they were received by the patriarch who shared their doctrine.<sup>38</sup>

Chosroes’s first act in Edessa was one of personal vengeance. This involved the wife of John Rusafoyo, one of the leading aristocrats of the city, who had entertained Chosroes in his magnificent urban palace when the king had been temporarily overthrown. At that time, his wife insulted the refugee monarch, an action that was not forgotten. Consequently, when Edessa came into his power, Chosroes had the woman brought to Persia and thrown into prison where she perished miserably. On the other hand, he treated her son Sergius with honour and eventually allowed him to return home, where he took over the ancestral estates.<sup>39</sup> Here, as elsewhere, the Persians left local elites in place.

The *marzban* of Edessa ruled an entire province. For municipal administration, the Persians appointed a local aristocrat, Cyrus, with the title of *archon* and the duty of administering the taxes.<sup>40</sup> He was also apparently bishop of the city.<sup>41</sup> He had gained his position through the influence of a relative who was Chosroes’s doctor. Eventually, around 624, while the war was still raging in Asia Minor, relations between Cyrus and the people of Edessa deteriorated. When the *archon*, who had been sent to Chosroes to request a reduction of taxes, found that he had been denounced by two Edessenes, he told the king of the fabulous wealth of the city and proceeded (evidently with royal approval) to despoil the churches and aristocratic houses. He stripped them of all the silver he could find, sending 120,000 pounds of it to Chosroes. Clearly, Edessa had retained considerable wealth under the occupation, and was capable of paying high rates of tax; but conditions in the last years of Chosroes embittered the population or at least the chronicler. This incident had an unpleasant aftermath. According to one account, Cyrus was eventually dismissed from his post because of the hatred of the locals.<sup>42</sup> His relative, the doctor Yonan, stirred Chosroes against the orthodox of Edessa, whom he accused of treasonous correspondence with Heraclius. The king ordered the *marzban* to take action. He assembled all the orthodox and gave them the choice of monophysitism, Nestorianism or death; they chose the monophysites. Shortly after, in 626, Chosroes ordered the entire population to be removed to Persia. Fortunately

<sup>36</sup> The text, preserved in an eighth-century version, is reproduced and translated in J. Markwart, *A Catalogue of the Provincial Capitals of Eranshahr* (Rome, 1930), p. 13, sec. 23. The *marzban* of Edessa also appears in a Syriac chronicle: Dionysius in Palmer p. 134, note 305. For the Sassanian administrative system in this period, see M. Morony, *Iraq after the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton, 1984), pp. 126–129.

<sup>37</sup> Dionysius in Palmer, *West-Syrian Chronicles*, p. 125f., with note 283.

<sup>38</sup> *MichSyr*, p. 381. See also below.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123f.

<sup>40</sup> Cyrus in Edessa: *MichSyr*, p. 402, (=Dionysius in Palmer, *West-Syrian Chronicles*, p. 133f.), p. 411; Agapius, *Kitab*, pp. 458–460.

<sup>41</sup> So I conclude from Agapius, *Kitab*, p. 467 who states that Heraclius exiled the bishop Qurra (as Agapius calls Cyrus), on the peculiar grounds that he could not read the gospel.

<sup>42</sup> Agapius, *Kitab*, pp. 458–460.



for them, the *marzban*, who was favourably disposed, deported the people little by little. By the time Chosroes was deposed, only the inhabitants of two streets had been sent down the Euphrates. They included Sergius son of John who had previously been sent to Persia.<sup>43</sup>

The looting of Edessa may have reflected a change in policy in Chosroes's later years as the war dragged on and voraciously consumed state revenue. The government turned to every source it could find, especially the accumulated wealth of great Roman cities and their churches, which had largely been spared. It was probably for this reason that the chroniclers accuse the Persians of deportations, pillaging, cruel requisitions and harsh taxation, as well as carrying off building materials, especially marble, together with pedestals of gold and silver from the churches.<sup>44</sup>

The sources for Syria, though far less detailed, also give the impression of a country where life continued normally. It appears that all the cities surrendered on terms, some of them rapidly, after the Persian army crossed the Euphrates. The example of Dara where resistance had brought disaster, together with the inability of the imperial forces to deliver them from the present danger, were no doubt factors. More immediately, though, the monophysite population was well known for its hostility to the rule of Roman adherents of Chalcedon, and Syria had recently felt the full brunt of violent repression under Focas. In 609, rioting that involved the factions as well as fighting between Jews and Christians, had culminated in the murder of the orthodox patriarch in Antioch.<sup>45</sup> The disturbances, which spread to other cities of Syria and Palestine, were brutally repressed by imperial forces who killed many and levied severe fines. As a result, Syria was even more disaffected than usual. In any case, there are few reports of destruction, devastation or looting by the Persians. On the contrary, limited information about three cities – Antioch, Hierapolis and Damascus – suggests a far more peaceful situation.

The history of Antioch, metropolis of Syria, is unknown in this period except for one perhaps significant incident. After the Persians took the city, the monophysite patriarch (who had been living outside the city while the Chalcedonians were in control) openly took his throne.<sup>46</sup> When this news reached Alexandria, its monophysite patriarch wrote a letter of congratulation to Athanasius, who thereupon called a meeting of his bishops announcing that the “Chalcedonian darkness” had passed away and praising the Alexandrians. When his colleagues agreed that the Syrian and Egyptian churches should be united, Athanasius set sail for Alexandria with five bishops, was warmly received and consummated the desired ecclesiastical union, apparently in 616.<sup>47</sup> In this case, the metropolitan church was functioning and able to carry on long-distance communication and travel.

<sup>43</sup> Dionysius in Palmer, *West-Syrian Chronicles*, p. 134f.

<sup>44</sup> See the complaints of *MichSyr*, II, p. 401, Theophanes 314 and Agapius, *Kitab*, pp. 451, 458. *MichSyr* assigns these depredations to 616, but the others have them in 614–626.

<sup>45</sup> For these events and their chronology, see G. Dagron and V. Deroche, “Juifs et chrétiens”, pp. 19–22.

<sup>46</sup> Agapius, *Kitab*, p. 450 reports that the Persians, on taking the city, killed the patriarch and deported the population. This appears to be a confusion with the riots of 609, when the orthodox patriarch was murdered: see the previous note. No source confirms deportation of the population, but this was a practice the Persians sometimes indulged.

<sup>47</sup> *HistPatr*, pp. 480–482. For the date see J. Maspero, *Histoire des patriarches d’Alexandrie* (Paris, 1923), p. 321f.; cf. pp. 318–324 for the meeting and its participants. *MichSyr*, pp. 381–399 gives the text of the agreement between the churches.

Hierapolis in northeast Syria near the Euphrates is known from one vignette only. In about 615, Saint Anastasius (of whom more will be heard) deserted the Persian army and settled in Hierapolis. He took up residence with a silversmith who was a Persian Christian, became his apprentice and stayed about four years. During this time, Anastasius became more fascinated with Christianity (he had been a Zoroastrian) thanks to his visits to the local churches where he was moved by the images of martyrs.<sup>48</sup> Here, the churches were open and dealers in luxury goods or bankers (silversmiths did both) were functioning.

Likewise, Damascus appears only in one incident, relating to the Byzantine reoccupation after the war. When the emperor Heraclius arrived, he met Mansur, son of Sergius, whom Maurice (582–602) had put in charge of the taxes of the city. When Heraclius requested all the taxes that had not been paid to Constantinople during the Persian occupation, Mansur replied that they had been paid to Chosroes. In a rage, the emperor had Mansur arrested and beaten until he finally extracted 100,000 gold pieces from him, then restored him to his old position.<sup>49</sup> Evidently the wealth of this city, or at least of one powerful individual, survived the occupation. Mansur never forgave Heraclius and was instrumental in betraying Damascus to the Arabs a few years later. This incident reveals a remarkable continuity of administration: the same official collected the taxes before, during and after the Persian occupation. In fact, his later role, where he was charged with raising troops for defence of the city, suggests that his was its leading family. It long retained its position, for Mansur's son Sergius rose to be treasurer to the Caliph, and was in charge of the taxes of the Christian population. Sergius was father of the even more famous John of Damascus, the theologian.

Taxes imply coinage, and there is no doubt that Syria had an active money economy when the Persians arrived. Bronze coins, suitable for small scale commerce, were struck in Antioch regularly until 610, while gold *solidi*, struck in the capital, were used for larger transactions. Silver coinage was not normally issued. Byzantine gold remained in circulation during the Persian occupation, for hoards buried in Syria after the Arab conquest frequently contain *solidi* of Heraclius struck during these years.<sup>50</sup> Likewise, the bulk of the bronze coinage used in Syria, at least until 616, was apparently provided by issues of Constantinople, which are also found in substantial numbers.<sup>51</sup> Syria also produced its own bronze coins, which have only recently been discovered and analysed.<sup>52</sup> They bear the images of Justin II, Maurice, Focas

<sup>48</sup> S. *Anastase*, text I, p. 49f., commentary II, pp. 226–230.

<sup>49</sup> Eutychius of Alexandria, *Annales* (Migne, PG 111.889–1156) 1089 (Latin) = *Das Annalenwerk des Eutychios von Alexandrien*, ed. M. Breydy (CSCO *ScrArab* 44, Louvain, 1985), p. 127f. (Arabic text); in the German translation (same title and editor, CSCO *ScrArab* 45, Louvain, 1985), p. 107, the sum is mistranslated as “1,000 dinars”.

<sup>50</sup> Note, for example the hoard of 534 gold pieces found near Apamea, of which 155 were struck during the occupation: Cecile Morrisson, “Le trésor byzantin de Nikertai”, *Revue belge de numismatique* 118 (1972), pp. 29–91, especially 34f. For other hoards of Byzantine gold from late seventh-century Syria, containing pieces of Heraclius, see S. Heidemann, “The Merger of Two Currency Zones in Early Islam. . .”, *Iran* 36 (1998), pp. 95–112, at 96, with further references. See also the summary of H.-C. Noeske, *Münzfunde aus Ägypten I: Die Münzfunde des ägyptischen Pilgerzentrums Abu Mina und die vergleichsfunde aus den Diöcesen Ägypten und Oriens vom 4.-8. Jh. n. Chr.* (Berlin, 2000) I. pp. 81–83.

<sup>51</sup> See E. Leuthold, “Monete bizantine rinvenute in Siria”, *RIN* 54/5 (1952/3), pp. 31–49; G. E. Bates, “A Byzantine Hoard from Coelesyria”, *ANSMN* 14 (1968), pp. 67–109; and W. Metcalf, “A Heraclian Hoard from Syria”, *ANSMN* 20 (1975), pp. 109–137. The hoards from Oriens are presented in convenient details in Noeske (above, n. 50) I. pp. 144–148; Cf. the scattered finds *ibid.*, I. pp. 215–264.

<sup>52</sup> See H. Pottier, *Le monnayage de la Syrie sous l'occupation perse* (Paris, in press), with full details. I have written an historical introduction to this work, which utilises some of the material presented here, but with more focus on the numismatic record.

and Heraclius, with inscriptions that are usually garbled, and mintmarks of Constantinople, Nicomedia and Antioch, also usually misspelled or written backward. Study of the dies of these coins shows conclusively that they all belong to one series, and that, even though the images and mintmarks are arbitrary, the system of dating is consistent and realistic. The coins are dated to years 1 to 21, which corresponds exactly to the period of the occupation. In this case, the Persian authorities, or perhaps a local mint working under them, issued coins that would be acceptable to the local population because they bore the familiar imperial types. While these coins were struck in small quantities, their existence, together with the continuing circulation of Byzantine gold and copper indicates a continuing money economy and, by implication, a vital economic life.

For Syria, archaeology offers a valuable if limited supplement to the texts. Many sites have been excavated and regions surveyed, but it is rarely possible to date the finds closely enough to assign them to the brief Persian occupation. Inscriptions, on the other hand, can offer an exact chronology. Although nothing on the great excavated sites of Antioch and Apamea can be assigned to these years, the neighbouring hills contain innumerable remains of villages where inscriptions often date the buildings, especially the churches. Abundant in the fifth and sixth centuries, they stop abruptly in 610. Likewise, the last dated inscriptions in the country around Epiphania (Hama) are of 605. All that would suggest that the Persian occupation had a drastic effect, perhaps even causing the abandonment of the region. Excavation of one of the villages, however, has show that such was not the case and that life continued, even if conditions eventually started to deteriorate.<sup>53</sup> The villages may have ceased to erect new churches (they already had many), but life went on. In the south, in the territory of Bostra, the picture is strikingly different. Dated mosaics show that churches were being built, restored or decorated during the occupation as they had been before and continued to be after. More surprisingly, inscriptions name the orthodox bishop of Bostra, showing that the normal church organisation flourished, even though generally the Persians favoured the monophysites. Evidently, they left this area to its own clerics and brought no major disruption.<sup>54</sup>

The most valuable textual evidence relates to Palestine, and casts considerable light on the cities of Caesarea and Jerusalem. Knowledge of Caesarea comes from the life of the renegade Persian cavalryman Magoundat, who became Saint Anastasius the Persian when he was martyred in 628.<sup>55</sup> Its narrative is worth considering in some detail. After Anastasius had converted to Christianity and lived seven years in Jerusalem, he set out to visit the shrines of the martyrs in Diospolis (home of St. George) and Mt Gerizim, he then came to Caesarea around 620. At first he stayed in the church of St Mary.<sup>56</sup> One day, as he was going to pray in the shrine of St Euphemia, he saw Persian magi practicing their rites in a house. He entered into a discussion with them, telling them who he was and denouncing their superstitions. They let him go, asking him not to say anything about them. Nearby, some cavalrymen who

<sup>53</sup> See the summary in C. Foss, "Syria", pp. 204–206, 232–234 and further discussion below.

<sup>54</sup> The churches are in Samma and Rihab, both southwest of Bostra; for them and the orthodox bishop, see Foss, "Syria", pp. 252–254.

<sup>55</sup> For the text of his biography see *S. Anastase*, I, pp. 40–91, and for a comprehensive commentary and historical discussion, *ibid.*, the entire vol. II.

<sup>56</sup> For what follows, see *S. Anastase* I, pp. 57–75, II, pp. 231–243.

were sitting in front of the governor's palace, noticed Anastasius and stopped him, thinking he might be a spy. When he explained that he had left the service, they held him till the commanding officer, the *sellarios*, came out, interrogated him and put him under arrest.

Three days later, the governor or *marzban*, returned to Caesarea, which was evidently his headquarters, examined Anastasius, found out that he was a Christian and a deserter and had him imprisoned as the saint, threatened with crucifixion by the King's orders, had insulted the Persian ruler. Anastasius was taken to the fortress, chained and put to hard labour carrying stones. In two more interviews, the *marzban* used threats and bribes to make him renounce Christianity, but to no avail. The saint maintained his faith before the governor and in prison where he rose in the night to celebrate the liturgy, though trying not to disturb the fellow-prisoner to whom he was chained. His actions, and a vision of angels who appeared in the cell, impressed a leader of the Jewish community, who tried to wake his neighbour, the *marzban* of Scythopolis (for this was evidently a prison for captives of the highest rank). Finally, the governor wrote to the King, who replied in a few days. Anastasius was summoned again and given the option of simply renouncing Christianity before the governor and two *sellarioi*, after which he would be freed, with no further punishment.

When Anastasius refused, the governor, following royal orders, ordered a seal to be put round his neck and sent him to the public prison to wait five days till a convoy of prisoners was arranged for transport to Persia. In his cell, he received two monks from his monastery in Jerusalem, who together with other Christians prayed and sang hymns with him on the eve of the festival of the Holy Cross. At this point, a prominent Christian official, the *commercarius*, who controlled the taxes on trade, got the governor's permission to take Anastasius to church for the celebration, where his presence inspired the local Christian population. When the five days were completed, Anastasius and two other Christian prisoners set out for Persia, seen off by a large crowd of Christians and Persians. The two monks from Jerusalem accompanied him on the way, and sympathetic crowds greeted him at every stop. From Hierapolis, he wrote back to his abbot, then left Syria for martyrdom near the King's residence in Iraq.

This long narrative provides the most detailed account of life under the Persian occupation. It is especially important as it reveals the existence of an organised administration that maintained normal relations with the population, and for giving some hints about that population. Caesarea was the provincial capital, as it had been under the Romans, and seat of the *marzban*. He had a palace and subordinate officers called *sellarioi* and an assistant, *meizoteros*, whom he sent to communicate with Anastasius.<sup>57</sup> His garrison troops, cavalrymen, guarded the palace, and were on the lookout for spies. The governor was in easy communication with the central government; messages to the King went back and forth rapidly. Royal orders issued to the provincial governor were received and followed. The regime plainly did not oppress the Christians: churches and monasteries continued to function, and churchmen were even free to visit the prison and to accompany the saint on his final journey. Christians could occupy high positions, as did the *commercarius*, who was so trusted that he could take Anastasius from prison for a church service. Not only was there religious freedom, but the Persian cult itself seems to have been exercised very

<sup>57</sup> *Sellarios*, however Greek it may look, represents the Persian *salar*, a term that will appear below: see C. Foss, "The *Sellarioi* and Other Officers of Persian Egypt", *ZPE*, pp. 138 (2002): 169–172; *meizoteros*: *S. Anastase* I, p. 71.

discreetly: the magi whom Anastasius encountered were meeting in a house and did not want him to spread word about them, perhaps to avoid offending the Christians, who formed the overwhelming majority of the population. In any case, Anastasius was not being persecuted for being a Christian, but for deserting his post and abandoning his ancestral religion.

The people of Caesarea also included Persians and Jews, though the Life of Anastasius reveals little about them. In addition to the garrison troops, there was evidently a civilian Persian population, some of whom bade farewell to the saint. They were probably the product of the Persian practice of deporting local populations and bringing in Persian settlers. Although not otherwise attested in this region, there were still Persians at Heliopolis (Baalbek) and Emesa (Homs) forty years after these events, when the caliph Mu'awiya transplanted them to Antioch and the seacoast.<sup>58</sup> Anastasius encountered a prominent Jew in the prison. He may have been there because his coreligionists had fallen from favour after a period of initial support from the Persians. In any case, the Jews of Palestine appear to have enjoyed some success, or perhaps a corporate existence of their own under Sassanian rule, at least in its initial stages, for a Hebrew lead seal of this period names a certain Josina, who held the title of *archon*. This may indicate a high civic official (like the *archon* of Scythopolis) in the same prison cell, or an official of the Jewish community.<sup>59</sup>

The existence of the *commerciarius* attests to a remarkable degree of continuity of institutions and economic life. Since the sixth century, such officials had been prominent figures in port and frontier towns, where the silk trade, which they monopolized under strict imperial regulation generated high incomes.<sup>60</sup> The prominence of the *commerciarius* in this account suggests that the same system was still flourishing; it could have even been easier since Palestine was now integrated into a vast empire that stretched to the Central Asian outposts of the Silk Road. The Life of Anastasius also casts some light on another aspect of the economy, that is coinage. When the Persian governor tried to bribe Anastasius to renounce Christianity, he offered him horses, *miliaresia* and protection.<sup>61</sup> In this period, *milaresion* was the regular term for the silver pieces that formed the backbone of the Sassanian system of coinage.<sup>62</sup> It thus appears from this text that silver Persian coins were in use at least by the Persian authorities, together with the Byzantine gold, useful for paying taxes, and copper that circulated among the general public.

<sup>58</sup> Al-Baladhuri, *The Origins of the Islamic State*, ed. and trans. P. Hitti (New York, 1916), pp. 180, 228.

<sup>59</sup> See F. Dexinger and W. Seibt, "A Hebrew Lead Seal from the Period of the Sasanian Occupation of Palestine (614–629 AD)", *Revue des études juives* 140 (1981), pp. 303–317. The authors identify the *archon* as an official of the Jewish community, since Jews were not supposed to hold civic office. Late antique inscriptions of the synagogue of Sardis, however, show that Jews could be members of the city council and hold respectable titles: see J. Kroll, "The Greek Inscriptions of the Sardis Synagogue", *Harvard Theological Review* 94 (2001), pp. 5–55.

<sup>60</sup> See N. Oikonomides, "Silk Trade and Production in Byzantium from the Sixth to the Ninth Century: The Seals of *Kommerkiarioi*", *DOP* 40 (1986), pp. 33–53. Appropriately, a seal of a *commerciarius*, datable to the 6/7th century, was excavated in the warehouses adjacent to the governor's palace at Caesarea: see J. Nesbitt, "Byzantine lead seals from the vicinity of the governor's palace and warehouses" in K. Holum et al., *Caesarea Papers 2* (Portsmouth RI, 1999), pp. 129–135, no. 5.

<sup>61</sup> S. Anastase I, p. 121.

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, Theophylact Simocatta, *Historiae*, ed. de Boor (Leipzig, 1972), V. 14.6, 11; Evagrius, *Ecclesiastical History*, ed. J. Bidez, L. Parmentier (London, 1898), VI., p. 21; and John Moschus, *Pratum spirituale*, cap. 185 (Migne, PG 87.3.3057–3061).

In Caesarea, churches and civil buildings, including the governor's palace, a fortress where high-ranking prisoners were kept, and a public prison, were all in operation.<sup>63</sup> In fact, it seems clear that the Persians maintained the urban fabric of the city much as they found it. The account of the miracles that the relics of St Anastasius worked after their return from Persia, probably written in the 630s, mentions churches of Christ and of St Cornelius as well as the Tetrapylon in the centre of the city and the exercise ground for the troops.<sup>64</sup> These are all structures surviving from the period before the occupation.

The Persians evidently did not inflict major damage on the city.<sup>65</sup> They may even have been responsible for major construction. When St Anastasius was imprisoned in the fortress, he was set to work carrying stones. For what purpose? Perhaps to build the fortress itself, for the site of Caesarea contains an enigmatic stronghold that has never been securely dated. At the southern end of the city, it incorporates the ancient theatre and has been interpreted as offering protection to the governor against a turbulent population.<sup>66</sup> Perhaps it would make more sense if seen as representing the authority of the occupying power, whose garrison would certainly have use for a fortress in a potentially hostile land. Whatever the date of the fortress, the life of St Anastasius, if no specific information had been given, would seem to be set in a normal (and peaceful) province of the Persian empire.

The presence of the governor of Scythopolis in the same cell as Anastasius raises the possibility that the Persians established a new system of administration, with different provinces from the Roman. Scythopolis had been the capital of Palaestina II, while Caesarea was headquarters of Palaestina I; the governor of one was not subject to the governor of the other. It would seem that the Persians had amalgamated the two provinces or at least extended the jurisdiction of the *marzban* of Caesarea.<sup>67</sup> Since the text gives no further information, no conclusions can be drawn. Changes of provincial boundaries, though, raise a possibly related problem, the origin of the Umayyad administrative system in which greater Syria, from Antioch to the borders of Egypt, was divided into four large military circumscriptions called *junds*.<sup>68</sup> Various explanations have been proposed: that they were an Arab invention; that they derived from an earlier Roman administrative system; or that they were a creation of the emperor Heraclius during the brief Byzantine reoccupation of 630–636.<sup>69</sup> It is tempting to hypothesize, rather, that they were creations of the Persians.<sup>70</sup> The term *jund* is of Iranian

<sup>63</sup> Current excavations have uncovered the governor's palace, a complex that included archives and a bath and stood adjacent to a group of warehouses: see Holum et al., *Caesarea Papers*, pp. 71–107, with further references in note 3.

<sup>64</sup> See W. Kaegi, "Some Seventh Century Sources on Caesarea", *Israel Exploration Journal* 28 (1978), pp. 177–181.

<sup>65</sup> Earlier excavators had attributed various destruction layers to Persian attack, but more recent excavation casts doubt on this notion: see K. Holum et al., *King Herod's Dream* (New York, 1988), p. 202f.

<sup>66</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 165.

<sup>67</sup> Strictly speaking, the text (*S. Anastase* I, p. 69, cap. 26) refers to the *archon* of Scythopolis, a vague term that elsewhere in the life simply means 'officer'. Whatever function it denotes here, however, the governor of Caesarea still would not have jurisdiction in the neighbouring province.

<sup>68</sup> The texts relating to them are conveniently collected in G. Le Strange, *Palestine Under the Moslems* (London, 1890), pp. 24–43.

<sup>69</sup> See the exhaustive discussion of J. Haldon, "Seventh-Century Continuities: the *Ajnad* and the Thematic Myth", in Av. Cameron, ed., *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East III: States, Resources and Armies* (Princeton, 1995), pp. 379–424 with full reference to earlier work, particularly that of Irfan Shahid, the advocate of a Heraclian innovation. See also Prof. Shahid's latest lengthy contribution to the controversy, "The Thematization of Oriens: Final Remarks", *Byzantion* 72 (2002), pp. 192–240.

<sup>70</sup> As by D. Whitcomb, "Archaeological Research at Hadir Qinnasrin, 1998", *Archeologie islamique* 10 (2000).

origin, and appears in the Armenian form *gund* precisely at this period, meaning a “military contingent”.<sup>71</sup> In an extension of that sense, it gives its name to a province, like the later Byzantine term *thema*.<sup>72</sup> Further, if the four *junds* attested under the Arabs already existed during the Persian occupation, they could correspond to the four great divisions of the Sassanian empire.<sup>73</sup> Closer examination, though, suggests that this was not the case. The Persian administrative capitals that are known – Edessa in Mesopotamia, Caesarea in Palestine and Alexandria and Antinoopolis in Egypt – were also Roman administrative capitals and in each case differ from the capitals of the later Arab provinces.<sup>74</sup> Whatever the explanation for the governor of Scythopolis imprisoned in Caesarea, it seems not to lie in any broad administrative change; rather, the Persian regime appears very conservative in maintaining existing structures, in this respect as in many others.

Before he came to Caesarea, St Anastasius had lived seven years in Jerusalem. At first he stayed with a Christian silversmith, following the profession he had learnt in Hierapolis. When he made known his desire to convert, the silversmith introduced him to a priest of the Holy Sepulchre, who passed him on to Modestus, then acting in place of the deported patriarch. Modestus baptised him and helped him to become a monk. He followed this vocation in a monastery four miles from the city. By 620, when Anastasius had arrived, the city had at least partially recovered from the devastation that accompanied its conquest. The siege, sack and massacres of 614 stand out in the sources, but the Persians did not leave the Holy City as a pile of ruins. Quite the contrary: after an initial period of favouring the Jews who had taken their side in the conquest, the Persians turned their support to the Christians, expelled the Jews and actively aided Modestus in rebuilding the city. According to one source, this was owing to the influence of Chosroes’s Christian minister Yazdin, who persuaded the King to relent and to send funds. In any case, Modestus set to work energetically, restoring the Holy Sepulchre, Holy Zion, and other churches, and completely rebuilding the church of the Ascension.<sup>75</sup> His attention was directed to people as well as buildings: he restored monastic life and, as the Life of Anastasius shows, directed his care to individuals. In 616, when the Holy Land was at peace, he persuaded the monks to return to St Sabas and other monasteries of the desert.<sup>76</sup>

Modestus’s work took more money than the Persian authorities supplied, so he turned in every direction. He went round the region, to Diospolis, Tiberias, Tyre and Damascus, asking the local communities for help rebuilding the churches and received substantial sums.<sup>77</sup> When John, the orthodox patriarch of Alexandria, heard of the devastation, he also sent money, together with supplies, food, clothing and animals, as well as funds for ransoming

<sup>71</sup> Etymology: see the article of D. Sourdel, ‘Djund’ in *Elz* and H. Hubschmann, *Armenische Grammatik I: Armenische Etymologie* (Leipzig, 1897), p. 130f. *Jund* is a normal Pahlavi word for ‘army’ and so appears in the papyri from Egypt under Persian occupation: see J. de Menasce, “Recherches de papyrologie pehlevie”, *JA* 241 (1953), pp. 185–196. For the Armenian term, see *Sebeos Commentary*, p. 317.

<sup>72</sup> Note, for example, the ‘region of the Vaspurakan *gund*’, *ibid.*, text 28.

<sup>73</sup> For the four divisions, see above, n. 36.

<sup>74</sup> For Egypt, see below.

<sup>75</sup> See *S. Anastase II*, pp. 172–180, with full source references.

<sup>76</sup> See *ibid.*, II, pp. 177–180, 187f, with translations of the letter of Antiochus of St Sabas.

<sup>77</sup> Eutychius 1084, who gives the name of Ramla, a city not yet founded in Modestus’s day, which replaced the ancient Diospolis, probably the place Modestus actually visited.

the nuns of Jerusalem and prisoners who had been captured by the local Saracen tribes.<sup>78</sup> Modestus's appeals reached as far as Armenia, where he established contact through pilgrims who arrived in Jerusalem from there in about 616. He entered into correspondence with the Armenian patriarch Komitas, describing his restoration of the churches and asking for material help. Komitas wrote back congratulating him, discussing the pilgrims who had reached the Jordan and Mt Sinai, but discreetly ignoring his appeal for help.<sup>79</sup> In any case, the correspondence shows that communications were open between far-flung regions of the Persian occupation and that pilgrimage was continuing, even to Sinai, an area often endangered by the local tribes. It appears that the Persians had established order over a wide region.

The archaeological record is far less vivid than the sources. It offers little corroboration for notions of widespread destruction at the hands of the Sassanian invaders.<sup>80</sup> On the contrary, as in the case of southern Syria, evidence from the outlying regions of the Holy Land reveals normal activity continuing through the occupation, with numerous inscriptions dated to the period 614–630. Most are epitaphs from churches that indicate no change in normal practices. They provide important dated evidence for the region southeast of the Dead Sea and for the large villages of the Negev in southern Palestine.<sup>81</sup> Papyrus documents discovered at Nessana in the Negev also have a bearing on this question, even though none of them has survived from the Persian period. Papyri from the late sixth and early seventh centuries show that the leading family in the village, who played the major role in its administration and church affairs, employed alternating names of Patrick and Sergius. The epitaphs of two of them, an abbot of the local monastery and his sister, dated to 628 and 630 during the occupation, have survived in the main church. They suggest that the family conserved its role under the Persians. When the papyrus documents resume in the 680s (the area was then ruled by the Umayyads), the same family is still prominent.<sup>82</sup> Here, too, it would seem that the Persian occupation caused no serious disruption in the social or economic life of the region.

The last place the Persians conquered was Egypt, a fabulously rich province, with a large and flourishing capital, Alexandria. The biography of John the Almsgiver, orthodox patriarch from 610 to 617, indicates the wealth of the church: huge amounts of gold, property in the city, and ships of ocean-going capacity that traded regularly with Italy and Sicily. Since his time in office coincided with the Persian occupation of Syria and Palestine, he was

<sup>78</sup> See the epitome of Sophronius and Moschus's life of John the Almsgiver, cap.6: H. Delehay, "Une vie inédite de Saint Jean l'Aumônier", *Analecta bolliandiana* 45 (1927), pp. 5–74; Sophronius and Moschus's work comprises the first 15 chapters of the life printed there, pp. 19–25; it is translated and annotated (without the text) in A.-J. Festugiere and L. Ryden, *Leontios de Neapolis, Vie de Symeon le Fou et Vie de Jean de Chypre*, (Paris, 1974), pp. 321–338. The longer life by Leontius of Neapolis (ed. & trans. Festugiere and Ryden, pp. 343–524), which has John sending materials and workmen for the reconstruction (cap. 18, p. 365f.), is not a reliable source according to Cyril Mango, "A Byzantine Hagiographer at Work: Leontius of Neapolis", *Byzanz und der Westen*, ed. I. Hutter (Vienna, 1984), pp. 25–41.

<sup>79</sup> The letters are reproduced by *Sebeos*, I, pp. 70–76.

<sup>80</sup> See the important discussion of R. Schick, *The Christian Communities of Palestine from Byzantine to Islamic Rule. A Historical and Archaeological Study* (Princeton, 1995), pp. 20–26.

<sup>81</sup> Evidence summarised *ibid.*, pp. 39–47; cf. R. Schick "The Settlement Pattern of Southern Jordan: The Nature of the Evidence" in *The Byzantine and early Islamic Near East II: Land Use and Settlement Patterns*, ed. G. King and Av. Cameron (Princeton, 1994), pp. 133–154.

<sup>82</sup> See C. J. Kraemer, *Excavations at Nessana 3: Non-literary Papyri* (Princeton, 1958), pp. 132f., 157.



especially concerned with refugees. People from the whole region, including government officials and churchmen, arrived destitute in Alexandria, where John provided charity and built hostels to shelter them.<sup>83</sup> Among them was the bishop of Tiberias, who died soon after arriving, and many clerics for whom John found posts after being assured that they followed the orthodox Chalcedonian faith.<sup>84</sup> This incident suggests that the refugees were not necessarily a cross-section of the population, but consisted perhaps primarily of those who had reason to fear a new administration – that is, officials and Chalcedonian clergy, who had been presiding uncomfortably over monophysite flocks.<sup>85</sup>

Despite the war and occupation, communications were maintained between Egypt, Palestine and Syria. John and his church were in active contact with the church of Jerusalem, to whom he sent material aid, just as the monophysite patriarch Anastasius was with his colleague from occupied Antioch. Athanasius of Antioch actually sailed to Alexandria in 616, met Anastasius in a monastery on the sea (for the Chalcedonian John presided in the capital), held a meeting at which union between the two churches was concluded, and stayed a month in the country.<sup>86</sup> A passing notice in the life of Saint John confirms what seems to have been frequent contact across the frontiers of the two warring states, when the patriarch met a monk who had been in Gaza just a few days before.<sup>87</sup>

St John, however, did not remain with his flock to face the invader. Instead, together with the patrician Nicetas, governor of Egypt, he sailed away to Cyprus, where he died in 619. They were part of another wave of refugees terrified by the advance of the Persians into Egypt, and able to make their way to the relative safety of Cyprus during the long interval between the Persian approach and the fall of the city. Some put their hope in the prophets to see whether the Scriptures predicted the fall of the city.<sup>88</sup> Others, including the monk John Moschus and Sophronius, future patriarch of Jerusalem, left Alexandria (where they had already taken refuge from the Persians) for the more remote safety of Rome as soon as they heard of the fall of Jerusalem.<sup>89</sup> When Alexandria opened its gates, the invaders supposedly massacred the young men and killed many monks of the region, but no narrative source describes conditions under their rule.<sup>89a</sup> There are only hints for Alexandria: the Persian governor, who apparently held the rank of *salar* (here called by his Persian title rather than the Hellenised *sellarios*), built a palace that was still standing three centuries later, and when the monophysite patriarch died in 622, a new one succeeded to his place without a problem,

<sup>83</sup> Moschus and Sophronius (above n. 78), cap. 6.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, cap. 11, 12.

<sup>85</sup> Note that the Chalcedonian bishops expelled from Mesopotamia and Syria had taken refuge in Egypt: see above, n. 38.

<sup>86</sup> *HistPatr*, pp. 480–482; see also above, n. 47.

<sup>87</sup> Leontius, cap. 23, p. 374.

<sup>88</sup> See the brief eyewitness account of the Cypriot monk John in P. van den Ven, *Le légende de S. Spyridon eveque de Trimonthé* (Louvain, 1953), p. 81f. The monk had gone to worship at the shrine of the martyrs Cyrus and John outside Alexandria; he accomplished his mission while the Persian army was still in Babylon and Nikiu.

<sup>89</sup> See the brief biographical sketch of Moschus, *Elogium auctoris*, in Migne, *PL* 74, p. 121.

<sup>89a</sup> The archaeological record, however, provides striking confirmation of violence. The great monastic complex and pilgrimage site of St Menas in the desert west of Alexandria, together with the town which had grown up around it, was destroyed by fire and temporarily abandoned. Extensive finds of coins allow this devastation to be associated with the Persian invasion, and suggest that the monks and other inhabitants fled – probably to Alexandria – not to return until Byzantine forces reoccupied the country.

maintaining monophysite supremacy.<sup>90</sup> The governor, incidentally, was the great conqueror Shahrbaraz.<sup>91</sup> The countryside seems also to have faced an initial devastation. The *salar* of Alexandria, on his way to Upper Egypt, stopped at Nikiu in the Delta where he slaughtered the local monks, who had hidden in the mountains and caves.<sup>92,92a</sup> News of the massacre of churchmen soon reached Coptos far up the Nile valley, where a famous wonder-working bishop, St Pistentius, presided from 599 to 632.<sup>93</sup> As soon as he heard of the approach of the fire-worshippers, he sent a circular letter to his flock announcing that “God has delivered us into the hands of merciless nations” because of their sins, divided all his property among the poor and fled to the dry hills above the desolate ancient city of Thebes. He stayed there during the entire occupation, at one point taking refuge with a faithful disciple in an ancient tomb complex filled with mummies.<sup>94</sup>

Pistentius’s refuge was near the abode of a famous local holy man, the monk Epiphanius, with whom he was on friendly terms. The remains of Epiphanius’s monastery have yielded a considerable body of correspondence, often fragmentary and obscure, on papyri and ostraca.<sup>95</sup> Some of it relates to this period. One woman wrote to the holy man asking what to do, since the Persians would be coming south. Another communication deals with a dispute over unpaid grain that went back to the time before the Persians arrived. In other words, the dispute was still continuing, with normal legal practices, under Persian rule. The writer of another letter asks an intermediary for permission to travel to fetch some grain from the Persian commander in the fortress of Thebes.<sup>96</sup> In this case, the Persian administration had representatives outside the provincial capital and was concerned to control movement. But Pistentius’s flight reflects fear of how the new administration might treat Christians. Although there are no reports of persecution, the Persians do seem to have interfered with the ecclesiastical organisation, by forbidding new bishops to be ordained, and ordering that

<sup>90</sup> Governor: *HistPatr* 485; patriarch: *ibid.*, 489; cf. 490, where the patriarch is obliged to flee Alexandria when the orthodox return to power under the Byzantine reoccupation. P. Gossman, *Abu Mina 1, Die Grufkirche und die Gruft* (Mainz, 1989) 182ff.; coins: Noeske, 1.186f.

<sup>91</sup> For this identification, see T. Hickey, “Who Really Led the Sassanian Invasion of Egypt?”, *Nineteenth Annual Byzantine Studies Conference Abstracts of Papers* (Princeton, 1993), p. 3, based on Arabic sources and a fragmentary Pahlavi payrus: A. G. Perikhanian, “Pehleviyskie papirusy sobraniya GMII imeni A. S. Pushkiina”, *Vestnik Drevnei Istorii* 77 (1961), pp. 78–93, no. 13.

<sup>92</sup> *HistPatr*, p. 486.

<sup>92a</sup> See Noeske, *Münzfunde*, I. pp. 77–79 (gold), I. pp. 132–135 (bronze).

<sup>93</sup> The news was apparently preceded by that about the disasters in Jerusalem: see the letter of Pistentius to Epiphanius filled with references to the Old Testament, with the ark taken captive to the house of Dagon and the Israelites slaughtered: see Crum and White (below, n. 95) letter 111.

<sup>94</sup> See Butler, *The Arab Conquest*, p. 85f., and the published lives of Pistentios: E. Amelineau, *Etude sur le Christianisme en Egypte au septième siècle* (Paris, 1887), pp. 39, 118–120, 135, 137–151 (Coptic), and De Lacy O’Leary, *The Arabic life of S. Pistentius*, *Patrologia orientalis* 22.3 (Paris, 1930), pp. 378–383, 419–429, 462, 473.

<sup>95</sup> For the monastery, its history and context, see H. Winlock and W. Crum, *The Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes Part I: The Archaeological Material; The Literary Material* (New York, 1926), especially pp. 100–103 (Persian occupation, with further details) and pp. 209–231 (Epiphanius and Pistentius). See also the excellent survey of the whole region, with full bibliography, T. Wilfong, “Western Thebes in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries”, *Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 26 (1989), pp. 89–145. The letters are published in W. Crum and H. Evelyn White, *The Monastery of Epiphanius at Thebes Part II: Coptic Ostraca and Papyri; Greek Ostraca and Papyri* (New York, 1926); for what follows, see nos. 433, 300 and 324.

<sup>96</sup> Another letter, no. 200, may refer to the Persian occupation of Thebes, for it ambiguously mentions men who have found their way to the district and have afflicted the poor. If they take Thebes, the writer maintains, the whole district will be in great danger.

the prelate of Hermonthis take over the adjacent diocese of Latopolis.<sup>97</sup> Nothing is known of the circumstances or duration of this policy.

Documentary evidence – in Greek, Coptic and Pahlavi – indicates that normal methods of administration continued, though with an initial phase of brutality.<sup>98</sup> One undated letter on papyrus from the Fayyum recounts that the writer had been abducted and tortured (presumably to reveal information) and had lost his children when the Persians came.<sup>99</sup> Similarly, an estate manager reports to his employer that he cannot carry out his duties because he has fallen into the hands of the Persians. In another case, a widow asks the help of a local bishop after the Persians had beaten her son (who had then run off) and taken away her cattle. They left her only with one pair which the money lender took as payment for the loan he had made her for her taxes. She now feared eviction from her house.<sup>100</sup> This text, like many others, reveals that the Persians were collecting taxes and making the usual requisitions, and that business went on much as it always had.<sup>101</sup> An official letter of October 623 urgently requests a high official to forward the balance of the taxes due so they can be sent on to the King of Kings; a receipt dated six months later acknowledges the 5,040 *solidi* that he sent in for the taxes of Oxyrhynchus and Cynopolis.<sup>102</sup> These are large sums. On a more humble level, in 626, a group of villagers in the Hermopolite nome acknowledge receiving 36 gold *solidi* from the lord Chosroes, and promise to deliver in exchange 1,980 loads of linen cloth. This indicates direct trade between the Persian authorities and the locals. A document of 628 acknowledges a loan of two *solidi*, confirming that Byzantine gold was the current coin for taxes, loans and other business. For smaller transactions, the Persians issued a series of copper coins in four denominations. The largest bore the head of the emperor with a crescent as well as a cross on his crown, his head flanked by an enigmatic, but probably Persian, star and crescent.<sup>103</sup> Other transactions did not involve money. A large archive of ostraca consists of requests for the keepers of a storehouse to deliver various products, mostly foodstuffs and fodder to a variety of military officials as well as bakers, fruiterers and other distributors.<sup>104</sup>

The Persian regime restricted movement, especially on the Nile. One lady had been obliged to travel by land to her property during the occupation because shipping was not available. She perhaps lacked an official permit, such as has survived in a papyrus written in the Persian language, Pahlavi. This requests the officials of a stretch of river below Oxyrhynchus to allow a certain ship owner to buy and transport wheat in their district. The titles of the

<sup>97</sup> See the brief notice of the bishop in *Synaxaire arabe jacobite*, ed. and tr. R. Basset, *Patrologia orientalis* III, p. 490f.

<sup>98</sup> The evidence is summarised and analysed most recently by Leslie MacCoull, "Coptic Egypt During the Persian Occupation", *Studi classici e orientali* 36 (1986), pp. 307–313 and Altheim-Stiehl, "Sassanians in Egypt". I am grateful to Prof. T. M. Hickey for these references.

<sup>99</sup> Quoted by P. Fraser in Butler *The Arab Conquest*, p. lxxii.

<sup>100</sup> J. Drescher, "A Widow's Petition", *Bulletin de la société d'archéologie copte* 10 (1944), pp. 91–96.

<sup>101</sup> For what follows, see MacCoull, "Coptic Egypt", pp. 311–313, with references. Note that the date and meaning of one papyrus, *Pap.Oxy.* XVI. 1921, which seems to record cloth requisitioned for 'the account of the Persians' has been disputed: see Altheim-Stiehl, "Wurde Alexandria", p. 13.

<sup>102</sup> *Pap.Oxy.* LI. 3637, LV. 3797.

<sup>103</sup> The large 12-nummus pieces were described and identified by J. R. Phillips, "The Byzantine bronze coins of Alexandria in the seventh century", *Numismatic Chronicle* 1962, pp. 225–241. For the others, see Hahn, *Moneta Imperii Byzantini* 3 (Vienna, 1981), p. 113f. Most recently, L. Domaszewicz and Michael Bates, "The Copper Coinage of Egypt in the Seventh Century" in J. L. Bacharach, (Cairo, 2002) have proposed to reattribute the 12 nummus pieces to Anastasius, on grounds that strike me as implausible.

<sup>104</sup> See J. G. Tait, C. Preaux, *Greek Ostraca in the Bodleian Library* (London, 1955), II, p. 2120 introduction.

officials, given in Persian, correspond exactly to those of the established Roman hierarchy, showing that the Persians simply took over an existing system and put it to their own use. In some cases they even used the same individuals. One group of papyri reveals the career of a bureaucrat who rose through the ranks in the accounting department of a provincial capital, his career uninterrupted from 591 through to 628, and even with a promotion during the occupation.<sup>105</sup> Further concern with communications appears in correspondence between a *sellarios* who was in charge of a posting station near Memphis and a high official in the provincial capital. The *sellarios* had sent food, animals and money and in return received grain and money (some of which was stolen by the intermediary) for his expenses and for the grooms at the station. Clearly, the Persians were concerned to maintain communications by normal means, though in this case the Persian title suggests a new level of administration or perhaps an official of the military.<sup>106</sup> Otherwise, the vast majority of officials who appear in these documents bear traditional Greek titles.

Most of the records in Egypt were kept in Greek, which continued to be the prime language of government. Some, however, have survived in Pahlavi, providing direct evidence of the activity of a Persian administration using its own language.<sup>107</sup> They contain requisitions for a variety of products, mostly foodstuffs, and levies of men (perhaps recruited into the army) from numerous towns. Bilingual Pahlavi-Greek documents also mention tax registers and again imply the full panoply of a bureaucratic administration.

So far, the papyri indicate a peaceful situation, but one enigmatic document, which also involves a *sellarios*, suggests that tranquillity may not have been universal. It appears to be a letter from a bishop to a group of rebels who had occupied and seriously damaged a town in Upper Egypt. The bishop addresses them at the request of the *sellarios* who administered Antinoopolis and Hermopolis and proposes to give his own son as a hostage to facilitate negotiations. He carefully notes that the Persian administration had given no grounds for complaint. Neither the circumstances nor the outcome of this situation are known.<sup>108</sup> One family, though, had nothing to complain regarding the Persian administration. It appears that the great estates of the Apions, who had acquired immense riches by the sixth century, continued to flourish until at least 623, presumably because they had reached an accommodation with the new masters of the country.<sup>109</sup> Here again, no details are known, but this evidence, together with the rich if sporadic documentation of papyri and ostraca, reflects stability and continuity. The Persians ran an orderly administration along traditional Egyptian lines with few innovations (notably the *sellarioi*); they allowed social, economic and ecclesiastical life to continue with relatively little disruption.

Evidence from the occupied provinces – from Armenia to Egypt – reveals a consistent pattern: stability, continuity and tolerance followed an initial period of violence. The conquest was often bloody, especially when places resisted: the population of Karin was

<sup>105</sup> See the analysis of P. J. Sijpesteijn, "Magistor, Sohn des Kallinikos. .", *Anagennesis* 1 (1981), pp. 93–102.

<sup>106</sup> *Pap. Oxy.* XVI. 1862, 1863.

<sup>107</sup> See the references in MacCoull, "Coptic Egypt", p. 312f.

<sup>108</sup> *Ägyptische Urkunden aus den Staatlichen Museen Berlin, Koptische Urkunden*, ed. H. Satzinger (Berlin, 1968), III, no. 338. I follow here the interpretation of the editor, but note that MacCoull, "Coptic Egypt" considers much of that very dubious, and would assign the document to the period after the Arab conquest. Mention of the *sellarios*, however, ensures its assignment to the Persian occupation.

<sup>109</sup> See J. Gascou, "Les grands domaines, la cité et l'état en Egypte byzantine", *TiM* 9 (1985), pp. 1–90 at 73, 75.

deported, those of Dara and, most notoriously, Jerusalem, slaughtered. There were massacres in Alexandria. The Persians seem to have followed the advice Chosroes supposedly gave to Shahrbaraz: “Receive in a friendly way those who submit, and keep them in peace and prosperity. But put to the sword those who may offer resistance and make war”.<sup>110</sup> But once order was established, the Persians ruled according to a traditional system where a *marzban* governed a province, with high subordinate officials called *salar*, an administrative hierarchy and garrison troops, of whom cavalry were the elite. Armenia was under military rule, but elsewhere a normal civil government was in place. The *marzbans* ruled from cities that had been capitals of Roman provinces and relied heavily on established authorities. Like the Romans, they maintained local elites in their dominant positions in the administrative and especially fiscal system. In large cities like Edessa and Damascus, or villages like Nessana, the same families retained their traditional influence.

The Persian regime collected taxes, apparently without major change. There was still a *commercarius* in Caesarea, and Egyptians endured their customary taxes and requisitions. If the provinces could pay tax, it was because they were still rich, and even prospering. The new churches of Armenia, like the stored wealth of Edessa and Damascus, certainly do not suggest poverty or overwhelming exactions. The urban fabric of towns that had surrendered peacefully survived intact. Silversmiths in Hierapolis and Jerusalem indicate an active trade in luxury goods or precious metals. Communications were regular between province and capital and within provinces, though in Egypt at least private travel required official permission. A cleric like Modestus could travel widely and carry on correspondence with distant Armenia. More striking is the apparent freedom of travel between the occupied territories and those still Roman: the patriarch of Persian Antioch could sail to Roman Alexandria, just as the patriarch of the city could send aid to Persian Jerusalem. War evidently did not cut the enemy powers off from each other.

It may not be an accident that the attested travellers were all churchmen, for the Persians tolerated and took an active interest in Christianity. After an initial period when the new regime tried to impose Nestorians or encourage Jews, it soon switched its support to monophysite Christianity, the religion of the vast majority of its new subjects. Monophysite patriarchs regained control of Antioch, Alexandria and Armenia. Churches were open and available everywhere; they were restored in Jerusalem, and in southern Syria new ones were being built or adorned. Monasteries functioned (though in Judea after Saracen attacks and in Egypt Persian devastation), and pilgrimage, even to remote Mt Sinai, continued. Despite the fears of clerics who fled their approach, the Persians allowed Chalcedonian Christians to maintain their influence in places like Jerusalem or Bostra where they were predominant. Zoroastrianism, the Persian faith, seems to have been conducted in a way that would not offend the Christian population.

The composition of the population remained much as it had been, except for the deportations. Whole cities were shipped off to Persia, following a long-established practice, which perhaps intensified in the last stages of the war. Some Persians moved in, as attested at Caesarea, but whether they were scattered individuals or part of a substantial migration (perhaps designed to strengthen Persian rule) cannot be determined. The last years, in

<sup>110</sup> *Sebeos*, 62f.

any case, seem to have offered less favourable conditions, with increased taxation and extraordinary exactions to finance the continuing war effort. Apart from that, though, life seems to have gone on under the Persians much as it had always done, with a high degree of prosperity maintained under a stable administration. While the Persians devastated Jerusalem and a few other cities, there is nothing in the available evidence to support apocalyptic visions of massive destruction or disorganisation. The Persians did not depopulate cities, ruin agriculture or destroy trade. They did not preside over an administrative breakdown or a vacuum of authority that left the locals to their own devices. Nor is there evidence of widespread urban deterioration or abandonment of the cities by their ruling aristocracies. On the contrary, apart from specific cases and the exacerbated circumstances of the last years, it seems that the Persians ran a stable administration using traditional elites and methods. The Near East may have been poorer when they left, but it was not devastated, depopulated or abandoned.

This evidence has implications for the Arab conquest. When the Muslim Arabs took over Syria only six years after the Persians left, they found a country whose society and economy were still intact. Local elites and the church helped to run a system that collected taxes and maintained stability. Like the Persians, they found a population that was overwhelmingly monophysite, alienated to the church of Constantinople even more by the efforts of Heraclius to reimpose Chalcedonian orthodoxy. Yet, now, that population had experienced foreign rule and, on the whole, not suffered from it. For the vast majority of the population and probably for most sincere monophysites, the Persian regime was no worse than the Roman. In a sense, the back of Roman rule was broken. The Persians had shown what it was like to be ruled from somewhere other than Constantinople, while the Ghassanids (who lie outside the present subject) had accustomed the people of Syria to domination by an Arab tribe, though Christian and firmly allied to the Empire. This combination may have made the arrival of a new foreign conqueror far less unwelcome than it might have been had the Persians never overwhelmed the Roman Near East.

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